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# A RURAL VIEW OF RURAL FREE DELIVERY.

BY EGBERT T. BUSH.

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THE article entitled "The Why of Rural Free Delivery," published in the December number of this REVIEW, can hardly have failed to interest thousands of people. The importance of the subject and the undeniable ability with which the author handles it attract and hold the reader. While many of us will take issue with him both on his premises and on his conclusions, much that he says in the language and manner of an able advocate is worthy of serious consideration. But, if the force of an article is ever weakened by manifest special pleading, then the most ardent admirers of that scholarly production must concede that it carries within itself no small amount of the element of weakness. And it may well be that this article, called into being by a careful perusal of that, will fall more or less under the same condemnation.

With the author's evident hatred of jobbery and fraud, every honest citizen is in hearty accord; but it does not follow that every such citizen must agree with his view of this important subject. There are, in fact, millions of honest citizens who have learned that the cry of "Jobbery!" so easily raised and so convenient on numberless occasions, does not always carry with it the proof of jobbery. They have learned that the special pleader in opposition to any measure, no matter how meritorious, is under great temptation to raise that cry as the quickest and easiest way to arrest attention. They are not unmindful that the "practical politician," having learned its magic power, often raises that virtuous cry for purposes of his own. They have seen him calmly gathering in the fruits of his groundless charge before the falsehood could be exposed. It is not in this spirit that the author of "The Why" hurls his condemnations. His motives

are most commendable; but there is no patent pending for the discovery that one may err with the best of intentions.

The scientific biography of what General Hawkins calls "this new creation in the interests of partisan power, . . . this later addition to our family of postal abuses," begins thus: "The time of its conception in the womb of practical politics was the last half of the year 1896." However desirable it may be, analytical biography rarely begins at that point; besides, there are those who, knowing something of both its history and its parentage, will contend that, whoever or whatever may have adopted it since its birth, Rural Free Delivery was never conceived in the womb of practical politics. It is well known that the rural people themselves, the tillers of the soil, hard-handed and hard-headed people as they are, first made the appeal for Rural Free Delivery. Seeing their city cousins enjoying free delivery at the door several times a day, these rural toilers began to wonder why they should not, to some extent, share in a service for which they were helping to pay. Their reasoning may have been defective, but they could not see why ten thousand people crowded together on a square mile, all of whom could reach the post-office by a short walk on pavement, should be served at their homes at public expense, while the toilers in the fields within a radius of two or three miles, with the rural post-office as a centre, were compelled either to serve themselves or do without their mail. They began to grow restless, to agitate the matter among themselves, even to ask aloud why some plan could not be devised by which at least the more densely populated rural sections might be served. From neighborly discussion they carried the question into their local Granges—the last place in the world for practical politics.

In 1891, Mr. Mortimer Whitehead, a prominent Granger of New Jersey, introduced the subject into the National Grange. In the winter of 1891-2, as a farmer and in behalf of farmers, he made the first argument for Rural Free Delivery before a committee of Congress, and succeeded in getting a small appropriation for experimental work. Here, then, was the beginning of "this new creation in the interests of partisan power." And it is safe to say that, unless the anatomy of the body politic has all along been wholly misunderstood, "the womb of practical politics" is not located in the region of the Grange.

It is a great mistake to say that "this was a luxury which the rural citizen had never dreamed of." The truth is, he had been dreaming for years—dreaming much of the time with faint hope of ever seeing his dreams realized, but dreaming none the less fondly on that account. To the personal knowledge of the writer, this matter was discussed in the rural press long before the date given as the "time of its conception in the womb of practical politics." In his own humble way, he published editorials in favor of some system of rural delivery, and did so without one thought that he was working in the interests of partisan politics.

We are told that, in many instances, "the sturdy citizens of the rural districts rebelled against its infliction." This seems to be a sad case, or, rather, a statement of many sad cases. That the Government should, as alleged, actually force upon a helpless community a service against which its citizens rebelled certainly smacks of tyranny in aggravated form. That a man's mail should be left daily at his door, when he prefers to go for it himself; that he should thus be deprived of the "excuse for going to the village for the mail," when possibly so much of his happiness depends upon that excuse,—seems to be nothing short of trampling upon the sacred rights of citizenship. That the boys and girls should be thus deprived of an excuse for an "enjoyable ride on the bicycle when the day's work was over," strikes one as a ruthless crushing of the young, no less than of the old, "in the interests of partisan power."

We read further: "The dissatisfaction is not confined to any particular class, but is shared by all the people who go to make up the usual rural communities. . . . They have missed the familiar old stage with its accommodating driver. . . . The boys and girls had ridden with him to school for generations." Yet on the back of this dark picture we find written: "So attractive had it become in its fifth year that many an honest citizen fell then who had never fallen before, and became an ardent advocate of this new state industry."

To say the least, there seem to be some incongruities here. If the rural people, not any particular class, but all classes, resent the imposition of Rural Free Delivery, how can it become so attractive to them? All who understand this matter know that routes are never granted, or imposed, without the asking; that it takes one hundred petitioners, heads of families, to secure

consideration of a proposed route twenty-four miles long. What then? Are we to infer that this insidious scheme has, through some occult power, become "so attractive" that people are actually hypnotized into asking for what they do not want? Are we to believe that, under some mysterious spell, from ninety to ninety-five per cent. of the people on a proposed route are wheedled into petitioning the Department to enforce upon them a service against which all classes rebel?

But the dear old stage—ah, yes! In the days of its glory, comparatively few people saw anything of it, and far fewer ever derived from it either benefit or satisfaction. "The familiar old stage" always took the direct road between two offices, becoming familiar enough to the few people along that short cut, but leaving all the numerous "back roads," often far more important thoroughfares, to get along as best they could without its benefactions. These neglected highways are now traversed by the Rural Free Delivery wagon, and the people who never saw "the old familiar stage," without seeking its route, are now served daily at their homes. If any of them are lamenting the late departed, the echo of their wail has failed to reach this locality. It is true that the old stage did sometimes carry passengers for hire; but its service in carrying children to school must have been very slight indeed. After thirty years of close association with old-time routes and country schools, the writer cannot recall a single instance in which a child was carried to school by the "accommodating driver." And very good reasons there are for this lack of service to the boys and girls. The stage rarely runs at the hour for going to school; besides, the driver would have to be very accommodating, indeed, to make that service of any particular value. Farmers' children have few dimes to spend for rides to school, and free transportation by the mail-coach—never heard of in this vicinity—must be either insignificant to the community or ruinous to the driver.

The practical politician and the quiet citizen who knows not the ways of politics will be equally puzzled to see how so glaring an "injustice," imposed in spite of protest upon a helpless rural community, can be made an element of strength to the party responsible for the outrage. If the matter is half as bad as "The Why" paints it, how can it fail so to arouse the anger of the outraged citizens as to become an element of great weakness? One

would think that, for every vote gained by subsidizing the carrier—if, indeed, there is any such possible gain—at least a dozen would be lost. To assume that such glaring wrongs would be allowed to go unrebuked, that partisan advantage can be gained by heaping indignities upon the people, is not only to discredit American manhood and American fitness for self-government, but to deny all the teachings of political history.

That now and then a man, even in the rural communities, should object to this new service was to be expected: first, because there must always be objectors to everything new; secondly, because a very small percentage of the people on every such route may be no better served than before, and possibly not so well. The man whose home is within three or four hundred yards of the wayside post-office does not feel the need of rural delivery. To him it is a needless and uncalled-for innovation. Besides, that office is kept by his good neighbor, who sells kerosene and a few other household necessities, and who “comes in handy” in various matters of local interest. It would be very strange if, now and then, one such rural citizen could not be induced to enter a protest against the “outrage,” and even to write, or to father, diatribes against the enormity, for publication in the “local press.” But such rural citizen, fortunately so situated that his mail is already brought practically to his door, is not favorably situated for voicing the sentiment of the community as a whole, much less that of the farmer who must travel three miles for his mail. Close observation of this matter of Rural Free Delivery, and personal contact with the people on various routes, have convinced the writer that what was to be expected actually is; that opposition to any proposed route is one of the things to be encountered, and that the opposition always comes from the immediate village or hamlet whose post-office is likely to be discontinued or adversely affected. This is only human nature with the gloss rubbed off. The people near the office are already well served; why should they favor any change? The postmaster not only wants the slight emoluments of the office, but he wants the farmers for miles around, the farther the better, forced into his store for their mail. There is money in it for him—daily droppings that might otherwise go elsewhere. Naturally enough, he can sway the sympathies of his near neighbors, who have nothing to lose by accommodating him; but the farmers out on

the route, from a half mile to three miles away, look upon it from a different point of view, and arrive at a very different conclusion.

It will hardly seem unfair to take for example a route recently established here in one of the counties of New Jersey, with which the writer is familiar. When it was proposed, every one knew that it would do away with two small offices. The postmaster at one hamlet kept no shop of any kind, and was very anxious to be relieved of his unremunerative responsibility. Instead of working up a sentiment against the change, he worked for it, and he and every one of his immediate neighbors signed the petition. The other postmaster did keep a little store. He was strongly opposed to the change; but, as he was in a measure caught napping, almost all of his neighbors signed the petition. A few weeks later, several of those who had signed were somehow induced to be equally accommodating with their signatures when a remonstrance was presented; but it should be borne in mind that here, as perhaps everywhere, the remonstrants all lived within easy reach of the post-office. Of the more remote petitioners, not one saw or to this day has been able to see, a new light. The route has now been in operation several months; and if there is one patron, not counting the ex-postmaster and his little clique of three or four, who is not well pleased with the service, all signs of such dissatisfaction are carefully concealed. And yet it might not be difficult for some interested party to induce one of those few to write or dictate a dismal wail over the wrong inflicted upon that helpless community. Now, in all fairness, may we not suppose that similar conditions prevail generally throughout the rural districts? Are we not justified in believing that, so far as these so-called "rural complaints" are concerned, it is the village against the farming community? Is there anything unreasonable or ungenerous in feeling that those rural citizens who lament the good old way are the very ones who, having been well served themselves, forget that people less favorably situated have equal needs, and possibly equal rights?

But we are assured that the village post-office had always been near at hand. That depends largely upon what is meant by "near." In a petition before me, the average distance for the entire number of signers is one and a half miles. That may seem "near" to people accustomed to paved streets and short

hours and a mail-box at the next corner; not so to the farmer, whose toil ends not with the day, whose team is probably as weary as himself, and whose boy or girl is thought to be better off at home in the evening than out on the bicycle for that "enjoyable ride" after the day's work is done.

We are told, also, that the postal needs of the people "upon whom this service was forced" had always been few—"usually confined to the weekly paper and an average, in strictly rural parts, of not over one hundred letters and circulars for each family per year." This leads one to wonder what constitutes "strictly rural parts." With no large city near, with only ninety feet of trolley-line in the county and with the post-office, in a town of five or six hundred inhabitants, two miles away, these had always seemed to be rural parts. But, according to the conditions laid down by our author, we are so far removed from the rural that we cannot tell where we are. If we take a tier of farms beginning a half mile from our post-office and extending to two and a half miles, the limit of service in this direction under the old system, we find that, of the nine farmers, five regularly take a daily paper. We find, also, that the lowest number of pieces of mail received per year by any one of these families is several hundred, while the highest reaches about three thousand. If this is not an average, neither is it exceptional in communities served by Rural Free Delivery; and it shows that the postal needs of such communities are far from being so few as many well-meaning people have been led to believe. It shows, too, what every one should begin to understand by this time—that the farmer of to-day is not the illiterate, non-reading, non-writing lout that some delight to paint and others would be glad to have him.

"A very large majority of the tax-producers," says General Hawkins, "are being compelled to pay about four dollars for every one earned by Rural Free Delivery, for an uncalled-for and unnecessary service in which it is impossible that they should have the slightest interest." This looks like a serious indictment; but, when we come to analyze the postal system, Rural Free Delivery does not seem so great a criminal after all. The postal service never has been, and perhaps never can be, strictly just. Somebody is constantly paying for what he does not get, and somebody is constantly getting what he does not pay for.



The inequality comes about in various ways. One man may carry his hundreds of letters a year three miles to the post-office, and look daily after his own mail or go without it; while another drops his few score letters into the box at the next corner, and has his mail delivered at his door. The cancellations of the one may be ten times those of the other, but the conveniences are all for the man who pays the little. The countryman is paying for what he does not get, while his city cousin is getting what he does not pay for.

We are sometimes told that the man in the city is entitled to better service, because he uses the mails so much more than the man in the country; but this conclusion is based on an assumption which it might be very hard to prove. While it is true that the city offices make a very fine showing on receipts and expenditures, it is doubtful whether the average citizen of the town, excluding those connected with houses that do business with country people, uses the mails as much as the average countryman; and it is certainly fair to exclude all business upon which country people, either directly or indirectly, pay the postage. We have been rather sneeringly told by one opponent of rural service that a single seed-house in Philadelphia pays more postage than a whole county in New Jersey. We have access to only one side of the comparison, and cannot prove it false or true. But let us concede its truth. What of it? How is it made possible for that house to pay so much? With whom does it do that extensive business? Chiefly with those rural people whose postal needs are said to be few—"usually confined to the weekly paper," etc. Who is it, then, that actually pays these thousands annually handed over to the Government by that house? Do not its patrons foot the bills? Are not these thousands and thousands of country people paying the postage on every pound and ounce and packet of seed sent out by mail? Are they not also paying, through the increased price of seeds, the postage on every catalogue? It is folly to say that the dealer pays the postage. As well say that the importer pays the duty! He does not, and he cannot. All expenses must necessarily come out of the last purchaser, the consumer of the goods. Any other supposition is at variance with an irrepealable law of trade. Then, while we should not grudge that house its mail facilities, we may properly insist that the toiler out in the country, far though he be from

the great centre of business, the man whose toil and whose "scanty needs" make possible much of that central activity, shall not be wholly overlooked. While we rejoice in the great store and the busy shop, it is well for all to remember that the roots of every industry run far out into the soil.

But, since the countryman is not paying directly into the postal revenues the full cost of rural service, it is hard for many to understand how it can be that he is not getting more than his share; or, in the language of our critic, that somebody is not compelled to pay "for a service in which it is impossible that he should have the slightest interest." Might not the same objection be raised against other services—any service? Few men are broad enough to look upon the people as a whole; and, from any other point of view, can any one be said to be interested in every branch of the public service? Is it not true that, by the same narrow rule, for more than forty years country people have been helping to pay for a service—City Free Delivery—in which they have not the slightest interest? There are no records to show that, when that service was established in 1863, the country people made any serious outcry, or denounced its origin as "the womb of practical politics." But it can hardly be denied that they had greater cause to protest then than city people have now. These are already enjoying the service, and a few of them—not many, let us hope—are grudging its extension to their country cousins. At that time, the country people had not the slightest prospect of such extension; and yet, as "tax producers," they were compelled to help pay the bills. And, surely, if rural service is open to the objection of being or becoming a possible factor in partisan politics, city service was, and still is, open to the same objection.

On July 1st, 1905, there were 32,055 rural routes in operation, and 21,788 city carriers in the service. The cost of the two branches was about the same, each a trifle under \$21,000,000. The rural routes served 12,213,000 patrons, no application for a rural route being allowed to count any children under sixteen years of age. The cities covered by the Free Delivery service aggregate, according to the last census, almost 28,000,000, counting all ages and conditions. The rural service counts nobody within a half mile of the post-office, all within that distance being, as the agents phrase it, "too handy by to be considered." If

we exclude a circle of a half-mile radius around every city post-office, we shall have almost nine hundred square miles of solid city, whose millions of people must, in all fairness, be excluded from the comparison.

The one and only reasonable objection to Rural Free Delivery is its cost. But, in reckoning this, there is one feature generally overlooked. There are two items that materially reduce the apparent cost: first, the discontinuance of star routes; secondly, the greater revenue derived by throwing the cancellations into the larger offices, from which the Department gets a much larger share. Whatever is saved by either of these means is properly to be credited to Rural Free Delivery.

Two routes have been granted to start from a certain office. The first, now in operation, saves \$110 annually on star-route and messenger service, besides taking up the cancellations of two offices from which the Government derived no revenue. Besides making one office unnecessary, the second route will take up one star route, thus entitling itself to a credit of approximately one-fourth its cost. Taking these two sources of saving, it is probably a fair estimate that the rural routes of the country should be credited with twenty-five per cent. of the debtor side. This would reduce the actual cost of the service to about \$16,000,000, and, after all fair eliminations have been made, show the country service to be little more expensive, million for million of actual patrons, than the city service.

Free delivery was first established in twenty-seven cities. The service has grown steadily—grown by its own merits, as we believe—until now it embraces between eleven and twelve hundred. Its birth was a boon. Its adoption was a step in the right direction, the direction of giving the people the most convenient service that circumstances would allow. Rural Free Delivery is not a new creature, of strange and abhorrent parentage; it is only a natural development of what was born of Progress more than forty years ago.

EGBERT T. BUSH.